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Macho & Mulch

Choosing a hybrid in South Florida is a very nuanced adventure.

Larry Port

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Let's get one thing straight. I'm not what Fox News would exactly label a lefty, tree-hugging, egghead liberal. True, I did watch Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and drank the Kool-Aid a bit, but not so much to completely eliminate Styrofoam and incandescent light bulbs from my life.

But I wanted a hybrid car, a low-fuel consumption vehicle that alternates between gas and battery power. In one fell swoop, I'd not only be transferring less money to unsavory foreign petrostates, but I'd also be reducing my carbon footprint. Regardless of your politics, data is

data, and there's a correlation between increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and historically increasing global temperatures.

I didn't want just any hybrid, I wanted the **Toyota Prius**, with its great mileage. My family wasn't completely sold on the idea, and I was plagued with nagging doubts. Compared to our minivan, it seemed small and unsafe. I always assumed that our next sedan would be bigger and more comfortable than our 2004 **Acura TSX**.

Let's face it: the Prius is also a symbol. It identifies you as . . . a lefty, tree-hugging, egghead liberal. On the West Coast, and in New York and New England, that might be great. But in South Florida, it's not so cool. We live in a place where if you don't have a luxury sedan, to put it bluntly, you're considered a loser.

To satisfy my hybrid desires, I started exploring larger vehicles that would accommodate our family of four comfortably. The **Ford Escape** and **Mercury Mariner** small SUV hybrids seemed like good options — not only would I benefit from the smug self-righteousness of burning less gas but I would support an American car manufacturer.

However, after talking to owners, most reported that they were getting about 27 miles per gallon, which I achieved in my Acura. The **Toyota Highlander** and others were similar: basically, they allow owners to clear themselves of their carbon-creating guilt. It was clear that the most planet-friendly cars are the smaller hybrids, such as the Prius or the **Honda Insight**.

Meanwhile, two of my friends bought Prius cars. The importance of this development cannot be overstated. I once read that the most critical ingredient in the spread of new technologies is social acceptance and interaction. Armed with two people in my social circle who had embraced the Prius, I now had precedents of ownership — and more importantly, friends who could answer my questions.

What about the space? I'm 6'4", so this is not a trivial question. "Are you kidding?" responded Adrian Minor, my car-expert friend who's as tall as me and broader. "There's plenty of room for me. Plus, I lowered the back seats and put eight big bags of mulch from Home Depot in there."

What about the mileage? And the quality? "Are you kidding?" asked Sean Leder, the first to make the leap and buy a Prius. "I've gotten 500 miles on a tank. The **Bluetooth** is as good as any **Lexus**. By the way, you should see how much mulch you can put in that thing."

We took a spin in a Prius and sure enough, the size was deceiving. In spite of its small appearance, the curved,

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bubble-like shape afforded more headroom than did my Acura. The vehicle sits a little higher too, allowing for a better view of the road.

I checked out some of the option packages and saw that I could get leather seats, **iPod** integration, Bluetooth connectivity, a backup camera, and all of the luxuries you'd find in a higher-end vehicle.

The tipping point occurred in a surprising way. It was spring, and the family was planning our summer carpool. I'd be taking the morning shift to drop the kids off at their local day camp. The thought of idling through the mile-long drop-off line full of **Cadillac Escalades**, **Land Rovers**, and other enormous kid-beast cars was too much to bear.

I snapped. So we traded in our Acura for 10 grand and leased a Prius. I negotiated a price of \$26,000, and after applying my trade-in towards the down payment, I had monthly payments of \$191.

It turns out the total cost of Prius ownership is a much-welcome surprise. This car is perfect for our dreary economic times. My lease payment is the lowest of anyone I know. Every two and a half weeks, after driving 400 miles, I fill up my tank with 9.5 gallons of gas. The tires are small and inexpensive to replace. And Toyota has a reputation for reliability, increasing my odds that I'll stay out of the auto shop.

The other thing I didn't anticipate is that when you first get a Prius, you become consumed with your mileage. Toyota enables this addiction via a graph in your dashboard that shows your average, current, and historical mpg. For the first month, I paid more attention to this than I did to traffic.

You learn tricks, such as using cruise control, anticipating stoplights, and over-inflating your tires to put your mpg into the high 40s. You push your gas tank to the limit, trying to get as many miles out of one tank as possible. This mileage game results in a bizarre and foolish form of machismo among male Prius owners. "One time, I got over 500 miles on a single tank," boasted Adrian.

Not to be outdone, and figuring the battery would power me to a gas station should I need it, I tried to best the 500-mile mark. One fine Sunday, I was nearing the end of a tank of gas with 450 miles on it. Of course, with the entire family in tow, I ran out of gas. The dashboard lit up like a Christmas tree with all sorts of warnings as I consumed what little power remained in the battery. We barely coasted into the closest establishment, our library, and we told the children we had planned to go there all along.

I texted Adrian: "Ran out of gas in Prius. Got stuck." Response: "Join the club."

In spite of the dirty little secret that Prius owners run out of gas on occasion, I'm a devotee. You know that smug face you see on the guy with the Prius at the supermarket? That's me. Here I am doing good by my planet, the air my kids breathe, and my wallet. And I challenge anyone to carry more mulch in their car.

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